
The Sistrum on Terracottas: Human Instrument or Divine Attribute?

While many Classical terracotta figurines represent musicians playing idiophones, such as crotals or castanets, the presence of the Greco-Roman sistrum seems very specific. It appears in the coroplastical repertoire as an exclusively divine attribute, never played by a human being, unlike other instruments such as the harp or the aulos. However, archeological data (about 200 objects or amulets) has confirmed that the sistrum, derived from a Pharaonic prototype, was a real and audible item used by individuals in Isiac ceremonies during the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

It is of interest to note that no word in ancient Greek or Latin refers to a “sistrum player” as a musician. The latter is more often named as a “sistrum holder.” Yet, is this individual a musician, a priest, or a simple devotee? The coroplastic corpus only presents a specific vision of it in the domestic context—a part of Isis’ image—but it is not sufficient to understand the sistrum as a musical instrument in ancient society.

An exploration of other types of sources is clearly necessary to understand the status of the sistrum player and his perception by Greco-Roman society. Without being a musical instrument per se, the sistrum embodies a dimension of sound that exceeds the simple reproduction of the Goddess’s image. According to iconographic and literary sources, the object seems rather to be understood more as a marker of identity than as a normal instrument.



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